

Native Americans: Nation v. Tribe?

Primary Sources

Native American Creation Myths

Document A

. . . Our legends tell us that it was hundreds and perhaps thousands of years ago since the first man sprang from the soil in the midst of the great plains. The story says that one morning long ago a lone man awoke, face to the sun, emerging from the soil Up and up the man drew himself until he freed his body from the clinging soil the sun shone and ever the man kept his face turned toward it. In time the rays of the sun hardened the face of the earth and strengthened the man and he bounded and leaped about, a free and joyous creature. From this man sprang the Lakota nation So this land of the great plains is claimed by the Lakotas as their very own. We are the soil and the soil is us.

Sioux Genesis

Document B

Way beyond the earth, a part of the Osage lived in the sky. They wanted to know where they came from, so they went to the sun. He told them that they were his children. Then they wandered still farther and came to the moon. She told them that she gave birth to them, and that the sun was their father. She said they must leave the sky, and go down to live on the earth, so they wept and called out, but no answer came from anywhere. They floated about in the air seeking in every direction for help from some god; but found none.

Osage, Children of the Sun

European perceptions of Native Americans

Document C

I gave to all I approached whatever articles I had about me, such as cloth and many other things, taking nothing of theirs in return: but they are naturally timid and fearful. As soon however as they see that they are safe, and have laid aside all fear, they are very simple and honest, and exceedingly liberal with all they have; none of them refusing any thing he may possess when he is asked for it, but on the contrary inviting us to ask them. They exhibit great love towards all others in preference to themselves; they also give objects of great value for trifles, and content themselves with very little or nothing in return these people are so amiable and friendly that

even the King took a pride in calling me his brother I could not clearly understand whether the people possess any private property, for I observed that one man had the charge of distributing various things to the rest, but especially meat and provisions and the like. I did not find, as some of us had expected, any cannibals amongst them, but on the contrary, men of great deference and kindness.

Columbus, Letter of March 14, 1493.

Document D

The Spanish have a perfect right to rule these barbarians of the New World and the adjacent islands, who in prudence, skill, virtues, and humanity are as inferior to the Spanish as children to adults, or women to men, for there exists between the two as great a difference as between savage and cruel races and the most merciful, between the most intemperate and the moderate and temperate and, I might even say, between apes and men But see how they [the inhabitants of New Spain and Mexico] deceive themselves, and how much I dissent from such an opinion, seeing, on the contrary, in these very institutions a proof of the crudity, the barbarity, and the natural slavery of these people; for having houses and some rational way of life and some sort of commerce is a thing which the necessities of nature itself induce, and only serves to prove that they are not bears or monkeys and are not totally lacking in reason. But on the other hand, they have established their nation in such a way that no one possesses anything individually, neither a house nor a field, which he can leave to his heirs in his will, for everything belongs to their masters whom, with improper nomenclature, they call kings, and by whose whims they live, more than by their own, ready to do the bidding and desire of these rulers and possessing no liberty. And the fulfillment of all this, not under the pressure of arms but in voluntary and spontaneous way, is a definite sign of the servile and base soul of these barbarians Therefore, if you wish to reduce them, I do not say to our domination, but to a servitude a little less harsh, it will not be difficult for them to change their masters, and instead of the one they had, who were barbarous and impious and inhuman, to accept the Christians, cultivators of human virtues and the true faith . . .

Sepulveda, The Second Democrates (1547)

Document E

Now if we shall have shown that among our Indians of the western and southern shores (granting that we call them barbarians and that they are barbarians) there are important kingdoms, large numbers of people who live settled lives in a society, great cities, kings, judges and laws, persons who engage in commerce, buying, selling, lending, and the other contracts of the laws of nations,

will it not stand proved that the Reverend Doctor Sepulveda has spoken wrongly and viciously against peoples like these . . . The Indian race is not that barbaric, nor are they dull witted or stupid, but they are easy to teach and very talented in learning all the liberal arts, and very ready to accept, honor, and observe the Christian religion and correct their sins (as experience has taught) once priests have introduced them to the sacred mysteries and taught them the word of God.

Bartolome de Las Casas, Thirty Very Judicial Propositions (1552)

Document F

The place they had thoughts on was some of those vast & unpeopled countries of America, which are fruitful & fitt for habitation, being devoyd of all civill inhabitants, where there are only savage & brutish men, which range up and downe, little otherwise then the wild beasts of the same And also those which should escape or overcome these difficulties, should yet be in continuall danger of the salvage people, who are cruell, barbarous, & most trecherous, being contente only to kill, & take away life, but delight to tormente men in the most bloodie maner that may be; fleaing some alive with the shells of fishes, cutting of the members & joynts of others by peesmeale, and broiling on the coles, eate the collops of their flesh in their sight whilst they live; with other cruelties horrible to be related.

William Bradford, Of Plymouth Plantation, 1620

Document G

They have no Fence to part one anothers Lots in their Corn-Fields, but every Man knows his own, and it scarce ever happens that they rob one another of so much as an Ear of Corn, which if any is found to do, he is sentenced by the Elders to work and plant for him that was robbed, till he is recompensed for all the Damage he has suffered in his Corn-Field; and this is punctually performed, and the Thief held in Disgrace that steals from any of his Country-Folks.

On the Tuscaroras, John Lawson, History of North Carolina, circa 1700.

Secondary Source

Document H

The word "tribe" does not do justice to the extreme variety of [Native American] political organizations, methods of food-gathering, cultural and religious patterns, and population size . . .

. native bands, tribelets, pueblo city states, nations and confederacies were as culturally different from each other as the nations of Europe.

Peter Nabokov, *Native American Testimony*.